DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 099 JC 890 126

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TITLE Requiring Ethics Instruction in Community and Junior Colleges: A Mission Unfulfilled.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Codes of Ethics; College Role; Community Colleges; *Ethical Instruction; *Ethics; *Moral Values; Religious Education; Required Courses; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

This essay offers an argument for including ethics instruction within the community/junior college curriculum. It traces the place of ethical and moral instruction in higher education from the 19th century, when moral philosophy was considered an integral part of the mission of a college, through the period when religious and ethical instruction was removed from the purview of research universities, to the current resurgence of interest in reinstating Western values into the curriculum. Decrying the decadence and decay of modern society, the paper suggests that the conventional wisdom in the academic establishment that condemned ethics instruction and moral education is partly responsible. Links are drawn between instruction in ethics, religion, and democratic values. Finally, the paper makes a plea for including instruction in ethics within the curriculum of every community and junior college as a means of developing a highly educated and ethical workforce. (AYC)

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REQUIRING ETHICS INSTRUCTION IN COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES:

A MISSION UNFULFILLED

by

W. F. Edmonson

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REQUIRING ETHICS INSTRUCTION IN COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES

A MISSION UNFULFILLED

INTRODUCTION

During the early history of our country and through the 1950s, ethical behavior was taught to students by churches, synagogues and parents. More recently, "single" parents are employed full-time and consequently have less time to spend with their children discussing ethical issues. This is also true in homes where both parents work. We have also seen a decline in attendance at churches and synagogues. This has resulted in our children experiencing a void in their exposure to what we have traditionally referred to as "ethics" instruction. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1986) defines ethics as "the discipline dealing with good and bad and with moral duty and obligation."

EARLY HISTORY

Our ancestors who migrated to this country did so for the purpose of religious freedom, among other reasons. This eventually led to the adoption of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, resulting in the separation of church and state. The protestant moral ethic continued to be taught in most American schools and was, in fact, favored by our early educators such as Horace Mann and John Dewey (Parker 22-25).

Early college curricula included moral philosophy (ethics) as an integral part and it was usually taught by the college president to graduating seniors. This was the capstone of all courses required of students. It emphasized the "building of character" for the soon-to-be graduates. This course which was, for the most part, moral ethics

served as the birth place of disciplines we know today as social sciences, natural sciences and behavioral sciences (23).

AN OVERVIEW OF THE DECLINE IN ETHICS INSTRUCTION IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

School children were given released time from school to attend nearby churches and synagogues during the early 1900s. Some public schools offered religious and ethics instruction inside the school classrooms. In fact, a survey in 1947 revealed that two million children were receiving religious and ethics instruction this way. However, in 1948, action by the U.S. Supreme Court declared religious instruction unconstitutional when provided on the public school grounds, during the regular school day. In 1952 the Court did approve such instruction if provided off school grounds, however, released time to receive such instruction diminished because of First Amendment challenges. The Court again took action in 1961 when it declared prayer in public schools un-constitutional. Numerous challenges have been brought before the Court, however, the decision has remained intact until the present time (24).

Confusion exists over the issue for it is not a question of mixing church and state. It is a matter of guiding students on moral issues and helping them to develop moral character. A hundred years ago, higher education institutions understood this to be a part of their mission. Most professors regarded themselves as protectors and sought to serve as examples of a higher wisdom which included: the nature of the good life; truth, beauty, and goodness; the value of thought and reflection. This did not discount the necessity of knowledge and skill, or of preparing the students to learn a profession and acquire the skills to

to make a living, but foremost, education was understood as moral development of the highest order (Lamm 55-56). Approximately half-way through the last century, wisdom came under progressive attack. Universities became more research oriented. They began to discover knowledge and distribute their discoveries without reference to ethical considerations. Research became an autonomous undertaking. Ethics and the moral mission was defamed as too pedantic, and outside the mission of a true "research university" (55).

Governor Mario Cuomo recently created a stir when he encouraged the public schools of New York to include the teaching of "values" in their curriculum. Secretary of Education William Bennett, under President Reagan, repeatedly urged public school superintendents and principals to include moral and ethical courses in their curriculum. One might ask: Why is this necessary? To be value-neutral is to be self destructive. It means one has no secure foundation upon which to base one's search for and transmission of knowledge and truth. That is, knowledge and truth are all relative and thus one might conclude ever changing (56).

If our society shows signs of moral decadence and decay from within, our community and junior colleges cannot deny a share of the responsibility for this. Walter Lippman, a journalist and critic, stated a half century ago "as events unfold, they (colleges and universities) cannot evade their responsibility by talking about the crimes and follies of politicians, businessmen, labor leaders, lawyers, editors, and generals. They have conducted the schools and colleges and they have educated the politicans, businessmen, labor leaders, lawyers, editors and generals. What is more, they have educated the educators" (56).

We can be encouraged, however, for more recently academic values and social-moral principles have been permitted out of the closet and admitted into the lecture hall of academe. Norman Lamm recently stated "my hope is that we also shall learn to reassert the existence and value of the spirit. "Spirit," is that dimension of being which lets us say of man that he has enduring importance; that there is more to him than 100 to 200 pounds of bones and glands, that man is not an irresponsible bunch of replaceable organs, but a responsible and irreplaceable image of something that transcends him; that, far from an accident of biology, the human being is a divine adventure" (56).

Informed people understand that western culture, out of which came our democratic society and the freedoms we so cherish, is baseless without its religious origins. Why should our institutions avoid this core of our traditions because it may be controversial? Leninism and Marxism are controversial, yet we introduce our students to these controversial theories. There is one major difference between them. Teaching "about" religion in community/junior colleges has never been in question, however, teaching religion itself is not within the mission of the public institutions. That should be left to the denominational, sectarian institutions. There is a middle ground, however, and that is the realm of ethics and the principles which underlie our democratic society (56).

This body of knowledge must be transmitted, not as dogma, but as the ethical foundation of our American democracy. They include such concepts as the sacredness of human life (derived from the concept of man created in a divine image); the value of learning and wisdom (derived from appreciation and respect for the Bible);

the equality of man (derived from the common origin of man according to the Scripture); and the human values of compassion, respect for the rights of others, honor, modesty and spiritual dignity (56).

Our society must return to it's original beliefs upon which it was founded: that there is a more infinite wisdom which we can acquire only through patient inquiry; that man is a spiritual being as well as a bio-chemical, psychological, political, social, legal, and economic animal (56).

A public community college cannot demand a religious loyalty test of it's students and faculty any more than it can demand a solemn oath to atheism or agnosticism, however, it must not be intimidated by the fear that ethics instruction means sectarian indoctrination. To the contrary, it can and should foster a moral climate that encourages respect for the human spirit, for honor, for law, for the love of learning, and most of all-- for the capacity for self-transcendence (56).

The alcohol and drug abuse, vandalism, sexual promiscuity, suicides, and general lack of common decency which we find within our schools, colleges and universities are related to the absence of ethics instruction and moral education in the public schools of America. This past decade has seen a conventional wisdom in the academic establishment that condemned ethics and moral education as inappropriate for the public institutions for it supposedly constituted "indoctrination" (Bauer 2-5). Now we are reaping what we have sown.

For example, many psychologists came to think that sexual restraint was not necessarily best for children, that moderate drug use is "OK" if not used in excess, and that some destructive behavior (vandalism) should be accepted as "self expression" (4).

Some educational philosophers believed moral education was simply a means to indoctrinate students with theological beliefs (2). We seemed to have failed to learn our history lesson that all good educational systems, from Roman times, have taught respect for parents and family, a sense of responsibility to community, an obligation to obey the law, a high value for human life, respect for nature, a love of beauty, and a thirst for time-honored truth and wisdom (4).

The most important unifying values our community/junior colleges must teach are the fundamental principles which are the basis for our free, democratic society. Our western heritage is embodied in such documents as the "Mayflower Compact," the "Declaration of Independence," and the "Constitution". These documents teach such things as the inviolability of the individual, the rule of law and not of man, and the rights and duties we citizens accept when we join civilized society for the purpose of protecting ourselves, promoting the general welfare of all, and the enjoyment of freedom. Today, we demand our "rights" whether civil or human. It is ironic, however, that while our rights multiply, our vision is becoming near-sighted. We lack the far-sighted historical vision of what values undergird our "rights" and make them worth having (4).

Of course, we know that moral values can be good or bad. They reflect our attitudes toward other people, situations and ourselves. We develop these inside us through our experiences and introspection. The more often we encounter different people and situations, the more often we should reflect personally on these experiences, the more humane we should become; the greater our empathy, the more compassionate our minds (Albritton 14).

Good moral principles can be stated with clarity for children at a young age and then expanded for those in higher grades and in college. For example, patriotism can be presented to first grade children as a virtue, but later students must be taught not to be uncritical of their country if they see it drifting from its ethical moorings (Bauer 5). There are also lessons from history, such as from Napoleon and Hitler, whose blind ambition finally destroyed them. Students can see where a totalitarian instinct leads. And, from the Roman wars students can learn about courage but also about conceit and cruelty (5).

Teaching ethics should not be merely the transmission of a desired set of beliefs. Rather, it should be a process, incorporated into the core curriculum, which provides students with an understanding of the norms and concepts that have sustained our democratic society since its founding. It should provide the student with the skills to examine and defend personal beliefs and give the student a strength of character which will equip him or her to participate in the conservation and improvement of our civilization (Bauer 5).

In 1956, Robert Maynard Hutchins said, "The pedagogical problem is how to use the educational system to form the kind of man that the country wants to produce" (Howard 314-317).

More recently, in the 1980s, we have observed ethical behavior taking a nose-dive. In the wake of Wall Street scandals, a recent Gallup poll revealed that eighty percent of respondents believe business people and Wall Street brokers to be greedier than they were five years ago (Dunn 40-43).

There are, however, signs of encouragement on the horizon. Today "business ethics" is being recognized as necessary for long-term corporate survival. Some seventy-five percent of the top 1,200 U.S. companies now have written ethical codes. In addition, many multi-national corporations require every employee to receive training in business ethics. An increasing number of universities are offering ethics courses for students enrolled in graduate business programs (40).

Religion, too, is becoming a stronger force in the corporate world, especially on the international scale. The Fellowship of Companies for Christ now reports membership of 500 companies with fifty chapters in Canada, England, Ghana, Israel, The Netherlands, Nigeria Singapore and the U.S.A. The Interfaith Center of Corporate Responsibility is a coalition of religious groups who agree to purchase from corporations which have made a commitment to social responsibility (40).

BARRIERS TO TEACHING ETHICS IN COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES

Some intellectuals worked hard, in the late 19th and 20th centuries, to reduce the value placed on religion, morality, ethics and patriotism. A host of figures--artists and celebrities-- were good at demeaning those whom they characterized as stuffy, Victorian, prudish and censorious. They made up what the late Lionel Trilling called an "adversary culture" in which the highest virtue was that of being scandalous (Trachtenberg 333-335).

But now, we find ourselves living in a new and changing environment. Virtue and morality have returned to our social cultural scene. It is becoming acceptable to discuss whether our education system, at all levels, is or is not being redefined to help students become--not smarter, nor more clever--but "better persons" who can be relied upon to behave in a decent fashion (333).

From the 1930s to the present time, we have had adequate experience of what men and women will do once they share a conviction that "situational ethics" cancel out the requirements of the old-fashioned one--the one that says we ought to treat other people the way we want them to treat us (333). As we work our way back to the belief that morality matters, and that we must hold ourselves accountable for the things we do, the effects will become visible in the fiber of our society and within our individual existence (334).

This is no small undertaking for our society places high regard upon the image of one suspended in a state of perpetual youth. The successful are those who have accumulated millions, who drive $50,000 cars, and who travel among the "jet set" to destinations only the rich and beautiful are permitted to enjoy (334).

TEACHING ETHICS IN COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES - FILLING THE MISSION

In September, 1980 a Gallup poll posed the question, "Would you favor or oppose instruction in the schools that would deal with morals and moral behavior?" A vast majority (seventy-nine percent) of the total sample indicated they would favor such instruction. Among those respondents who had children attend public schools, eighty-four percent favored such instruction (Ryan 231-233). There is, I would submit, a mandate in this response for us who teach in community and junior colleges and are responsible for its curricula.

If most Americans believe, moral education and ethics courses contribute positively to an individual's intellectual growth; if they help develop our better natures and nurture our highest hopes, then we should support and encourage that they be included in the general education core of the colleges and universities of our land (Parker 25).

A written CODE OF ETHICS is a starting point for upgrading a community or junior college's moral and ethical climate. A constant reinforcement of such a code of ethics by the chief executive officer and all top level administrators down the line to all faculty and staff will establish a precedent that varying from college ethical standards will be

unacceptable (Dunn 41). Establishing a code of ethics won't "convert the corrupt into the virtuous," points out Andrew Likierman, Director of the Institute of Public Sector Management at the London Business School, "but it will give individuals access to a body of knowledge and create a climate in which the institution (and it's faculty) are better able to make informed judgments" (42).

Aristotle said that man becomes virtuous by performing virtuous acts; he becomes kind by doing kind acts; he becomes brave by doing brave acts. An administrator and faculty member who takes on the responsibility of providing ethics instruction is simply reassuming a responsibility traditionally performed by the early educators of this land. The role of the school, community and junior college is not simply to make students smart, but to make them smart and good (Ryan 233).

The rediscovery and affirmation of substantive values can be perceived as a large, complex and sensitive task, easier said than done. But we are not without guidance, if we choose to undertake such action. A first step must be an institutional demonstration of a willingness to affirm some standards, to establish a code of ethics for its administration, faculty and staff. For a second step, there are some books that are intellectually rigorous and informative. These include: Richard Weaver's VISIONS OF ORDER, published by Louisiana State University, 1964; SOME OBSERVATIONS OF AMERICAN EDUCATION by Robert Maynard Hutchins, published by Cambridge University Press 1956; THE REPUBLIC AND THE PERSON by Gordon Keith Chalmers, published by Henry Ragnery, Inc., 1952 (Howard 17). Others of more recent vintage are THORNY ISSUES: HOW ETHICS AND MORALITY AFFECT THE WAY WE LIVE by

John Langone, published by Little, Brown and Company, 1981 and STAGES - UNDERSTANDING HOW YOU MAKE MORAL DECISIONS by Nathaniel Lande and Afton Slade, published by Harper and Row, Publishers, 1979.

I would propose that every community and junior college include instruction in "ethics" within its curriculum and that this course become the "capstone" of the college experience for every graduate. If it is true, and I believe that it is, that America's future is dependent on a highly educated and "ethical" work force, then we in the community colleges must begin shouldering our responsibility for teaching ethics. We must ensure that all individuals who come to us for a quality education are exposed to those time-honored ethical principles which are the "cement" which holds our democratic society together.

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